

The Cosmopolitan Virus - Covid-19 Does Not Strike Randomly

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Koopmans, R. (2020). *The Cosmopolitan Virus - Covid-19 Does Not Strike Randomly*. (Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research). Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH. <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/223137>

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Research Report — Published Version

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Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Koopmans, Ruud (2020) : The Cosmopolitan Virus – Covid-19 Does Not Strike Randomly, Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin

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The Cosmopolitan Virus – Covid-19 Does Not Strike Randomly

By Ruud Koopmans

Boris Johnson has it, and so do his health minister and the Prince of Wales. The list of prominent people who are infected is long and grows daily: Prince Albert of Monaco, Carmen Calvo, Spain's deputy prime minister, US Senator Rand Paul; Michael Barner, the European Union's chief Brexit negotiator; two ministers of the Brazilian cabinet and four from Burkina Faso. Also included are high-ranking German politicians such as Friedrich Merz, one of the principal candidates for the succession of Angela Merkel, Green MP Cem Özdemir, and Henriette Reker, the mayor of Cologne. In sports, among many others, Paolo Dybala of Juventus and Kozo Tashima, head of Japan's football association are affected. Lorenzo Sanz, the former President of Real Madrid, died on March 21. In the film industry, Tom Hanks and Idris Elba are among those infected, and in the world of business Antonio Vieira Monteiro, national CEO of Santander Bank, was the second deadly victim of corona in Portugal. Spanish opera star Plácido Domingo is infected, and Cameroonian jazz legend Manu Dibango died on March 24 in a Paris hospital.

Given the scale of the pandemic, one might argue that it is only natural that prominent people are also affected. Moreover, they are likely to have more social contacts than ordinary citizens and therefore a greater likelihood of contracting any kind of infectious disease. However, it seems that the degree to which the virus has hit the world's powerful, rich and famous is way beyond what random chance or even the generally higher exposure to social contacts of prominent individuals would dictate. As of 3 April, 2020, there were one million detected cases of Coronavirus infection worldwide. While an impressive number in absolute terms, it amounts to only 0.01 percent of the global population of currently almost 7.8 billion people. Formulated differently, less than one in 8,000 individuals worldwide has been infected with the corona virus. The by no means exhaustive examples mentioned above suggest that the rates of infection among royalty, ministers, members of parliament, football players and international artists are of a much larger magnitude.

The reason, so much seems obvious, is that the virus, certainly in the initial weeks and months of the global outbreak, has spread along international network ties. Members of the cosmopolitan class who regularly travel to foreign countries for international summits, business conferences, concert tours, and sports tournaments are much more likely to have been exposed to the virus than ordinary citizens who live their lives mainly locally and nationally. Moreover, to the extent that citizens outside the cosmopolitan class were affected in the initial stages of the pandemic outside of China, international contacts often also played a role. Take for instance the cases of the by now ill-famous Champions League football game between Atalanta Bergamo and Valencia on 19 February, or the diffusion of the virus across Europe by ski vacationers returning from Austria's Tirol region.

While relatively many of the cosmopolitan class contract the virus, comparatively few of them may die of it, simply because they tend to be younger, have better prior health statuses, and have privileged access to testing and health care. The princes of our globalized world are perhaps more likely to get infected, but less likely to die. Those who

do not belong to the cosmopolitan class and those who cannot afford Champions League tickets or ski holidays in the Alps have so far been much less likely to catch the virus, but especially the old among them have a high chance of the infection being fatal. Moreover, if the pandemic is not brought under control, the social inequality in infection rates is likely to decline. Meanwhile, the virus has established footholds across the globe, from which it can spread locally, even without any further infections through international networks.

While many of the members of the cosmopolitan class have been able to switch to home office to protect themselves and others, it is the members of the suddenly highly valued, socially more locally rooted “vital professions” in sectors such as health care, food production, distribution and retail, or the provision of security that have to continue or even intensify their work under exposure to the virus, in order to keep society going. In the longer term, the economic fallout of the corona crisis is likely to be borne disproportionately by precisely these more locally rooted sections of the population, whose “indispensability” may turn out to be short-lived.

What the political impact of this class dimension of the pandemic will be, for instance for the rise of populism, which is closely linked to the social cleavage between cosmopolitanism and local rootedness, remains to be seen. What is already clear, however, is that the grim reaper of Covid-19 does not strike randomly, but in highly socially structured ways.

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4 April 2020

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